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ABSTRACT

There is a national trend toward using teacher teams and collaboration to solve various learning and behavioral problems. Teacher collaboration is necessary because of teacher shortages, especially in special education, and increasing diversity in student needs. Collaboration is especially important in rural schools because of the need to share scant resources. During two summers, a rural preparation and training program for preservice and in-service special educators was conducted. The program consisted of three courses--methods of instruction, learning theories in special education, and assessment. To fulfill the practicum component, students worked with children with academic, social-emotional, or behavioral disabilities who were attending a summer school provided by the university. One student from each course served on a collaborative-consultative planning team. Assessment of the team process was conducted via an observation checklist, a self-evaluation survey, and instructor ratings of individual performance. For both summers, all teams progressed through the five stages of consultation: establishing the team, identifying the problem, generating interventions, implementing interventions, and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions. Across all three instruments, preparedness and participation were high. All but two students left with a good grasp of team process. Pre-service teachers were surprised to discover how many strategies, behaviors, and skills could be taught in such a short time and how strategies that were implemented worked in such a short time. (TD)

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EVALUATING TEAMING SKILLS IN A RURAL UNIVERSITY CLINICAL EXPERIENCE: CONTINUATION ACROSS TWO SUMMERS

Over the past decade, a national shortage of qualified teachers has been well documented in the education literature, causing a high number of unprepared and non-certified personnel to provide instruction to students, including those with disabilities (USDOE 2000). This shortage impacts rural special education because openings may be more difficult to fill in rural districts, causing a number of teachers to serve on emergency or waiver of certification status (Boe, Bobbit, & Terhanian, 1998; Lemke, 1994). Faced with this teacher shortage and the need for standards-driven school reform, collaboration and consultation among teachers is required for successful problem solving and whole school viability (Friend and Cook, 1990).

Another reason for the growing need for collaboration is the increasing presentation of diversity in student needs. There is a national trend toward using teacher teams and collaboration to solve various learning and behavioral problems in public schools. This trend continues in importance because students in public schools are continually presenting more diverse needs, and no one teacher possesses all the expertise necessary to address the many and varied issues that emerge in classrooms (Johnson, Pugach, & Devlin, 1990).

Collaborative consultation empowers educators, parents, and students. Collaboration has been common in schools even before becoming popular on a broad basis because of the historic need in rural areas to share scant resources (Martin & Williams, 2000). Therefore the preparation of pre-service and in-service teachers to participate in and contribute to team decision-making for students with diverse and exceptional needs is especially imperative in rural areas.

Team collaboration requires redefinition of roles and structures in conjunction with reflection on practice (York, Kronberg, & Doyle, 1995). Team development occurs in stages (Joiner, 1993). Each stage adds a dimension to the team's effectiveness (Are we doing the best job possible?), efficacy (Are we doing the best possible job in the best ways possible?), and efficiency (Are we doing the best possible job in a timely manner?).

In addition, at all levels of education, there is a focus on performance indicators of expected learning. With the shift from curriculum-based to performance-based measures that require knowledge and skills, this method of evaluating team member performance provides reliable data to indicate that pre-service teachers perform at levels of competence required to meet NCATE Standards. The evaluation tools developed for this project will assist instructors to sort out who are meeting national criteria, an essential component of program evaluation.

Program Description

During the Summers of 2001 and 2002, a rural preparation and training program for special educators was conducted with both a pre-service and an in-service focus. A university-based Summer School was provided for community children. Included were children with various academic, social-emotional, and/or behavioral disabilities who were referred by their parents and teachers. These Summer school experiences provided clinical opportunities

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for three university special education courses, Methods of Instruction, Learning Theories in Special Education (the Behavior Change course), and Assessment. All three of these courses carry a practicum component. To fulfill the practica, Methods students planned and implemented instructional activities for small groups of children. Learning Theory students conducted functional analysis, planned and implemented behavior change programs for individual children, and evaluated the effectiveness of the behavior change. Assessment students conducted formal and informal assessment of the academic needs of individual children.

One student from each of these courses served on a collaborative-consultative planning team. Each child had a planning team. Each student had an expected roll to perform on the team in relation to the child. Teams met once per week over a five-week period. Results were brought to team and interpreted in team. Problem solving was based on the on-going team assessment. These teams were designed to simulate actual in-school Teacher Assistance Teams, which were unavailable to university students during summer months.

Method

There were three instruments designed for this project serving two functions. One was an observation checklist to provide formative assessment of team process. The other two were summative evaluations of team member performance: the reflective self-evaluation tool, and the instructor rating of individual performance. These instruments were developed through consultation between the two instructors, and their implementation was thoroughly rehearsed to increase reliability of inter-observer agreement and minimize observer drift.

Team Behavior Observation Checklist was the formative instrument used by the two instructors to document team progress across the five team meetings. The form contained a frequency chart and a checklist. The frequency chart documented each member's demonstration of active listening, contributing, disagreeing agreeably, questioning, and encouraging others to participate. These frequencies were totaled for individual team members and across behavioral factors. Along with the frequency chart was a checklist of the five stages of team planning. Team planning stages were as follows: 1) establishing a team, (2) problem identification, (3) generating interventions, (4) intervention implementation planning, and (5) evaluation of the intervention. The observing instructor circled each of the stages demonstrated by the team during observed a team meeting. Note that a team could demonstrate more than one stage during any meeting.

Team Self-evaluation was a summative instrument used by students to reflect on effective team participation and on whole team function. This form consisted of six questions. Items 1-5 were answered by individual team members, the team then discussed one or more items of their choice in detail, and responses to item 6 summarized team discussion of their chosen items from 1-5.

Individual Summary Evaluation of Team Work was a summative evaluation of the individual team members' performance by the instructor. This five-point, Likert-type scale addressed how individual members contributed to the teaming process and the effectiveness of the team effort using the characteristics of prepared contributions, interpersonal skills, team planning, team decision-making, and team evaluation of effectiveness. At the end of the practica, the instructor evaluated each student once using this summative tool.

Research Questions

To demonstrate a model of collaborative pre-teacher teaming experience and describe its evaluation process the following questions were explored:

1. Did the team's behavior progress through the stages of consultation: establishing the team, identifying the problem, generating interventions, implementing interventions, and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions implemented?
2. Was there evidence of preparation, participation, and process improvement in the Individual Summary Evaluation of team work by members?

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3. Were the team members able to reflect on and make at least one recommendation for the improvement of team process?
4. What were the cross-validating, common themes among instruments: Team Behavior Observation Checklist, Team Self Evaluation, and Individual Summary Evaluation of Team Work?
5. Would a second set of data yield similar results across research questions 1-4?
6. To what degree did Assessment and Learning Theory students agree in their responses to the Team Self-evaluation items 1 through 5?
7. To what extent did the team self-evaluation ratings agree with instructor ratings of similar items on the Individual Summary Evaluations?

Analysis

Multiple case sampling increases validity, and cases may be chosen on the basis of conceptual grounds (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each evaluation instrument presents a case for comparison, and instructor-posed questions serve to bound the cases in terms of what would be examined. Case comparison across time, that is replicating the described teaming process with another cohort of university students, increases construct validity and provides a measure of reliability for these three instructor-made instruments. Hence, this study is a replication of and extenstion of previous work at this rural university (Friedland & Walz, 2002).

Question 1: The Team Behavior Observation Checklist was used in order to determine the teams' progress through the stages of consultation. The instructor assigned to observe each particular team recorded incidents of demonstrated team behaviors related to the consultation stages at a given meeting. In 2001, there were 45 instructor observations made over the five-week period. In 2002, there were 27 instructor observations. The data was analyzed by counting the frequency of demonstrations of each stage of team planning.

Question 2: The Individual Summary Evaluation of Team Work was used to determine the individual members' degree of preparedness, participation and reflection on the team's process. The instructor rated each student at the end of the practica experience. A histogram was constructed of the group's ratings for both overall performance and by each characteristic.

Question 3: The Team Self-evaluation was qualitatively reviewed to determine whether Learning Theory and Assessment students offered at least one suggestion for improving team process in retrospect.

Question 4: Qualitative comparison was conducted to determine if there were some cross-validating common themes among these three instruments: Team Behavior Observation Checklist, Team Self-evaluation, and Individual Summary Evaluation of Team Work?

Question 5: A second set of data, Summer 2002, was examined in the same ways as for data collected in the Summer of 2001 to determine if similar results would be obtained across research questions 1-4?

Question 6: Assessment and Learning Theory students' responses to the Team Self-evaluation items 1 through 5 were qualitatively compared for patterns of agreement.

Question 7: Team Self-evaluation Summaries were compared for agreement with instructor ratings of similar items on the Individual Summary Evaluations?

Results

For both Summers, 2001 and 2002, checklists of stages of team planning frequency count indicated all teams progressed through the five stages of consultation. The first week all teams demonstrated stage one establishing the team, although in 2002, teams spent much less time on establishing the team than was spent in 2001. During the second week, all teams demonstrated problem identification and generating interventions. During week

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three, several teams demonstrated planning implementation of interventions. Two teams were still engaged in planning the implementation of interventions toward the end of Summer 2002 session because evaluation of their intervention led to the conclusion that the intervention was not effective to solve the learning problem, resulting in revision and redesign. During week four, stages 2, 3, and 4 were demonstrated by most of the teams. During week five, all but one team demonstrated evaluation of the intervention. Therefore it was concluded that all teams demonstrated progress through the five-stage consultation process.

For Summer 2001, Individual Summary Evaluation of Team Work ratings revealed that the range of performance was 19 to 25 on the 25-point checklist with one outlier earning a rating of 13. This student missed two of the five team meetings, thus she lacked the opportunity to demonstrate the expected skills. This indicates that most team members performed at or above the 80% level. For each characteristic identified, most students received a rating of 4 or 5, which is high on the 5 point Likert-type scale. These results are summarized as follows: Prepared Contributions 20/22 students, Interpersonal communications 18/22 students, Planning 21/22, Collaborative decision making 20/22, Evaluation of effectiveness 14/22 with six receiving a rating of three.

For Summer 2002, Individual Summary Evaluation of Team Work ratings revealed that the range of performance was 19 to 25 on the 25-point checklist, with one outlier earning a rating of 16. This student missed the last team meeting because of confusion about the meeting time. This, however did not affect her rating. Her pattern of refusal to initiate in team and her hesitancy to contribute her findings to the team effort brought her ratings down considerably. This indicates that most team members performed at or above the 80% level. For each characteristic identified, most students received a rating of 4 or 5, which is high on the 5 point Likert-type scale. Results are summarized as follows: Prepared Contributions 19/20 students, Interpersonal communications 19/20 students, Planning 19/22, Collaborative decision making 20/20, Evaluation of effectiveness 15/20 with four receiving a rating of three.

Results on the Individual Summary Team Evaluation form are strikingly similar across the two data sets. For the most part, students came prepared, participated in the team and reflected on the process. Two students did not perform at the level of their peers for very different, individual reasons. One did not attend team meetings on a consistent basis, and the other demonstrated difficulty with assertiveness in team. The lower rating received by these two students confirms the validity of this instruments to discern students not demonstrating teaming skills. The most revealing result of comparing the two sets of data on this instrument was lower ratings in the area of Evaluation of effectiveness.

All students made at least one suggestion for team improvement on the Team Self-evaluation form, and some made several. For summer 2001, the one process improvement suggestion that most team members agreed upon was that more time in team would have made problem-solving flow more smoothly. Most opted for more or longer team meetings. The second theme included suggestions for improved communication, such as having team minutes taken, increasing casual conversation away from meeting times, and establishing clearly agreed upon objectives. For Summer 2002, there was general agreement that members participated actively and were well prepared. They echoed concerns about not having enough meeting and planning time. Some interesting qualitative themes emerged from responses of this cohort to item 4, which asked what they learned from teaming. The most prominent of these were:
1) Assertiveness in team – "Teaming allows perspectives to be shared that otherwise would not be seen. Therefore, information must be shared, so don't be afraid to speak up;." and (2) "The power of observation as a tool for change;" the meaning of unobtrusive observation, and then the importance of comparing observations among observers. Several students commented about how well teaming really works to make academics and behaviors better, even in the short time afforded by the six weeks of Summer School program. One student expressed surprise at how much academic performance influences behavior.

In comparing Assessment and Learning Theory students' Team Self-evaluation Summary items 1-5, some patterns emerged. Even though overall, team members participated and were prepared, it was noted that the two Assessment students felt that two of the Learning Theory students were holding back, not contributing what they knew to the team effort, "...didn't have much to say." Conversely, the Learning Theory students felt that, by the

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time all the assessment information was presented, they did not have adequate time to present behavioral concerns. Thus, they felt less supported by the team in their decision-making. Overall, students felt that in order for teaming to produce effective planning and successful interventions, flexibility and organization are crucial.

Instructor evaluation ratings of unique contributions to the team agreed with team self-evaluations in the areas of participation and preparedness, with the exception of three individual students. Instructor ratings of team efforts differed from team self-evaluations in the area of evaluation of effectiveness for four students.

Discussion

Overall, the students realized that it takes more than one person to effectively manage an instructional environment. All but two students, one in each Summer session, left with a good grasp of team process. For pre-service teachers, the whole experience was an "eye opener" regarding academic skills deficits and behavioral issues. Many were surprised to discover how strategies that were implemented really worked in such a short period of time, and to discover how many strategies, behaviors, and skills could be taught in such a short period of time.

Similar results were obtained for two Summers in a row. Across the three instruments, preparedness and participation were high. Time for teaming and effective communication of children's assessment results and behavior analyses presented difficulty. Summer 2002 team members were able to reflect back on the stages of teaming as evidenced by several comments they made on the Team Self-evaluation Summary stating that it is important to get to know team members and the roles that each must fill. Another area of difficulty expressed was establishing goals. Several students expressed that their teams were hesitant to move in a certain direction. In Summer 2001, one instructor actually had to prompt the team to move from problem identification and description to planning the intervention. During Summer 2002, the other instructor had to prompt a team to keep notes so that they would have a starting point for each new discussion.

Instructor evaluation ratings of unique contributions to the team agreed with team self-evaluations in the areas of participation and preparedness, with the exception of three individual students. Two of these had difficulty with interpersonal communications, and the other had difficulty developing ideas. Instructor ratings of team efforts differed from team self-evaluations in the area of evaluation of effectiveness for four students. This area involves the ability to reflect in action, or think on one's feet, choose and implement alternatives, and celebrate success. One student gave such short answers that there was no evidence to demonstrate reflection. One had also received a lower rating in participation based on her low contribution to team, so there was little basis for reflection. And two simply reiterated team comments without much interpretation.

It may be that this culminating reflective activity is too much all at once at the end of the practicum experience. Perhaps teams would benefit more by integrating reflective tasks into their teaming at the end of each team meeting. Perhaps then, Evaluation of effectiveness could more comprehensively address the three Es, "Effectiveness, Efficacy, and Efficiency."

Implications for Rural Practice

In these simulated team experiences, students demonstrated evidence of moving through the stages of consultative team process. It would follow that, even in a quasi-official learning environment, simulations are worthwhile practice to develop teaming and collaboration skills. Therefore, rural teacher preparation programs do not have to be limited by lack of local resources or rely on resources from a distance. They can create valid experiences in simulated team situations focused on problem solving for children.

Implications for Further Research

Action research is a viable method of inquiry that enhances program evaluation and leads to improved methods of preparing teachers to meet both the standards of expected performance and the needs of individual

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children. It is also beneficial for students to see their instructors engage in action research, as this provided a model to guide their development of inquiry.

Several questions that would further verify commonality and validity among instruments remain in process of analysis in relation to this study. One such inquiry is to examine the three instruments regarding the students' use of reflective techniques in relation to evaluating their teams' effectiveness, efficacy, and efficiency. What was the make up of their on-going reflection? What alternatives were discussed? Were they able to identify needs and celebrate their successes?

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